

BALA LAKSHYA JYOTHI

(Lighting up Children's future)

Issue: Five

Quarterly Newsletter from RELIEF FOUNDATION

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CONTENTS

Message from Chairperson	1	How can you support us	11
RF News	2	Contact us	11

A Message From The Chairperson

Dear champion friends of Relief Foundation,

Relief Foundation wishes all its donors and supporters a very happy new year in this first issue of Newsletter for the year 2016.

The last quarter was a very challenging one, due to the Chennai Floods, that had its impact physically, but not in our mission or spirit. Support came in from many fronts, prominently from Rotary Club of Madras East, to help us restore the damages incurred to our office and classroom.

Our work has firmed up and learning on the ground is now a matter of discussion in many Montessori circles. We are now invited to present our Montessori education projects at the AMI EsF (Education sans Frontiers) conference to be held in July / August this year at Hyderabad. This has certainly given us a fillip and accelerated our energies.

We are extremely grateful to all the families and friends who have generously been supporting as well as spreading the word about the amazing outcomes in the classroom as well as peaceful parenting awareness that has resulted in tranquil family environments.

Best wishes till we meet next!

Vidya Shankar,
Chairperson

RF News

Updates from CASCADE Montessori Rural Resource Centres

Jamunamarathur Centre

Toddler Children

The children who have been coming steadily in the morning have slowly moved on to the first few Sensorial activities of the Pre-primary. One of the children has also been shown few of the Tamil Sandpaper letters. From the month of January, a visually challenged child has been coming as well. He has shown progress in identifying his basic requirements like taking a mat out before he starts to work on his own. He is regularly accompanied by a relative as well to guide him.

Training Update

The adults from both our Rural Centres were present for four days at Chennai for a mid-year training program. They listened keenly to the history of RELIEF Foundation and were intrigued by the vision of self-sustenance for our Rural Centres. They were also empowered on the nuances of communication and the need to be proactive. The adults also got an opportunity to meet and interact with the Trustees and Committee Members of RELIEF. The last day was spent on learning more about usage of some of the materials in the environment and also on material making.

Harvest of Millets at the small farm

The first crop of 'Samai' which was planted in the month of September was harvested in December by our gardener and few others. The incessant rains prevented us from processing the harvested crop until the end of December. The yield was relatively lower than usually expected as the sowing was slightly delayed. Nevertheless, the first organic crop from our own Rural Centre encouraged us to move forward.

Republic Day Celebrations

The adults held a small flag hoisting ceremony on Republic Day and the young children who attended the event actually went on to work in the environment for sometime before they left. It was an interesting lesson for the adults that 'holidays' are more for adult's convenience than a need for children.



Community Connection

Once the training was done, Mrs. Vidya Shankar along with three others visited the Jamanamarathur centre. This visit was an opportunity to delve deeper into the lives of the tribal adults working with us. The visit to their homes told us a lot about how their childhood days would have been and gave us reinforcement on the need of why we need the Rural Montessori Centres.

This visit also saw the first community 'Bhajan' being held at Jamanamarathur. It was well participated by children and adults. On day two, a parents meeting was held which brought forth quite a number of questions that went through their minds. A video of children in our urban environments were shown. Parents were happy to see functioning and mature environments, where children were seen peaceful and in deep concentration. They raised a lot of questions relevant to the centres functioning as well as sought support for parenting their children. You can read more about the parents meeting here <https://www.omprakash.org/blog/parents-meeting-1>



New Facilities

As more new materials have been added, we bought three more steel shelves to the environment along with a wooden cupboard for storage of supplies. These were procured and delivered in the month of January at the centre and has helped to add more furniture to the slowly growing Pre-primary. With the addition of new material, adults have opportunities to give new presentations while children have some wide range of material to work with.

Challenges Faced

The month of November and early December saw a poor attendance from the children due to rains. The parents were hesitant to bring the children in the rains and hence the disruption in classes was inevitable. However after the rains stopped, children started to come with the same level of enthusiasm.



Vallambudukuppam Centre

Parents meetings

Parents meetings are regularly organized to empower them to create a sense of responsibility for their children's education. We have given specific time in the evening between 4 and 4.30 p.m. everyday for discussion with parents. Parents need to come during their allocated time to clarify their doubts and raise questions about the system of education. They do raise questions about language development, arithmetic, physical development, and sometimes seek suggestions to engage their children at home as well.

Parents have given positive feedback about good changes they see in their children. When we hear parents telling us that their children told them not to say bad words or not to tune cartoon channels in television, we are indeed delighted. It only strengthens our belief that children show us the way always.

A quarterly parents' meeting was held on 26th December. In that meeting we discussed a lot about children's overall progress, method of education and answering the parents' doubts. It was heartening to see parents asking us to show them some presentations like decimal number system, not to assess its workability but to understand how it works with children. There is a huge connection between what they missed as children and how they are trying to bridge that gap through watching such presentations as adults.



Evening Classes

The number of children in the evening has gone up to 19 children. Children start coming to the centre around 4.30 p.m. and do their school home work for about 30 to 45 minutes. After finishing their work adults start giving them presentations using pre-primary material. Children wait for this session as they choose to work with Geography, Tables in Arithmetic, Phonic sounds and moveable alphabets to read in English with great interests.

We also have twice a week sports session for these children. While one day has been allocated for outdoor games, one day has been allocated for indoor games. This has created a sense of bonding between the adults and the children indeed.



Weaving Sessions

Art and craft must find its place in education. Relief Foundation, in the past too, had introduced several such craft and skill based programmes for children in schools. So, we have started one such initiative in our Vallambudukuppam centre too. The fundamental needs of humans alone guided them to discover and invent new things. Clothing differentiates us from other species. Weaving is an important skill where a child is completely involved both physically and mentally. Mr. Mani who has been working with our children in Thiruvanmiyur centre for more than 2 years, has been going to Vallambudukuppam centre weekly three times from 11am to 3pm. Weekly 2 days he spends time with the pre-primary children while on Saturdays he works with evening classes children, their parents, casa children's parents and some interested women. They all seem to like to learn this skill. For children it improves their concentration tremendously.



Library

Reading is an enjoyable activity for children, if introduced early. Children love to read books and not necessarily look at the pictures alone. It is very important to have books that suit their ages. In other words, they need to be books that are developmentally appropriate. We have 90 books in our library. Children in our evening classes borrow books and take it home for reading. We are maintaining a register where children record before taking and after returning the books. It all depends on how we trust children and how naturally they reciprocate.

Children in pre-primary use these books in the morning sitting and reading in the corner allocated in the environment. The books are chosen by them and not by adults. We do however encourage children who are above 4 years to borrow selected books, if they like.



General Update

A new teaching assistant Ms. Ananthi has joined the centre. She is an AMI certified assistant. She has more than 3 years of experience of working with children in Montessori environments. Her addition is an added advantage for the centre. We wish her the best.

CASCADE-Family learning Cooperative^(SM)

General Update

Admissions have scaled up and we have reached 30 children in total. Parents are attending regular study circles and have been regularly supporting outdoor activities needed for our children.

The new children's parents were oriented on preparing children to attend CASCADE - involving them in hands on work at home. The parents too were requested to complete reading two books of Dr. Montessori - What you should know about your child and Child in the Family, before bringing their child for regular sessions at CASCADE. The parents' optimal stake and support holds key for the

success of this model cooperative, that we hope to replicate in our rural centres too. Three parents are in Montessori training and they would be taking up positions as Guides once they complete the course.

Tree Walk for Children and their Families

A tree walk for children and their parents was organized on February 6th, 2016. A volunteer from NGO Nizhal took the parents around the Kotturpuram tree park that houses more than 15 indigenous trees and some exotic trees. She gave an interesting glimpse of trees by stating its link to Sangam Tamil literature, folklore, Proverbs, scriptures as well as its medicinal and ornamental uses!

Parents & children were really excited when she unveiled lots of facts about trees and their role in the ecosystem. Children in groups quickly plunged into the task of collecting and discussing among them about parts of trees, some exploring the park on their own and a few asking questions to the volunteer.

Please visit our Facebook page and website for updates about this initiative.

www.cascadeflc.org

<https://www.facebook.com/CASCADE.Chennai>



Visit by Partner

Relief Foundation has tied up Omprakash Foundation, an international organization for international volunteers. This organization focuses mainly on creating a platform for volunteers to link up directly with its NGO partners. One of its members Ms. Lacey Worel visited us in November to understand our work. She also visited our Vallambudukuppam centre in Gummidipoondi Taluk to know how Montessori education is implemented in a village. She was extremely satisfied with our work. Ever since her visit, we have been getting some good number of requests from international volunteers and interns. Relief Foundation is equally happy about this partnership.

Flood Relief Work

Relief Foundation's primary area of work is education. Though we were actively involved in relief work in the past, ever since we started to focus on education, our energies were directed towards strengthening the hands of parents and communities to provide a safe environment and learning space for children.

But December month's flood was unprecedented wherein many families were stranded and were looking for support from

every corner. While support poured in from many quarters, calls from some of the interior villages were not much answered because of lack of accessibility and coordination. Relief Foundation was requested by few villages for support. With timely donations made by various donors, we were able to identify 6 villages in Thiruvallur district in Tamilnadu with the help of Mr.Jagan, a local contact. An initial survey was conducted to ascertain the needs and also to list down the children who were in need of support. Each village had a volunteer who went to every house to know the name & class of children in particular apart from other details like father's name, etc. This list later helped in distribution in two ways:

- To eliminate duplicates
- To ensure that only those who registered got the benefits

The identified villages were:

- Ammankulam
- Manali Pudhunagar
- Sadayankuppam
- Athipattu Pudhunagar
- Vellankulam
- Vichur

We could support 700 children. We distributed bags, notebooks, stationery items like pen, pencils, geometry boxes, etc. We are happy indeed that we were able to contribute in a meaningful way. We also take this opportunity to thank all the donors who extended timely help without which this distribution would not have been possible.

Survey Work Photographs



Distribution Photographs



Happy School Programme

We reported in the previous issue of this newsletter that Relief Foundation in partnership with Congruent Solutions has been developing a comprehensive tool to assist schools to look into every aspect of schooling for a child. The product is in the development stage and will very soon be completed. We hope to start our testing the product soon. We will share some more updates about this development in our next issue of this newsletter.

New Partnership

Huma Pharma, a group of student volunteers from Paris approached us for an internship project during August of this year. We have finalised the workings of the project objectives after a series of discussions. The plan is to work in our Gummidipoondi centre with the community, on health awareness. The team has already been working in Madagascar and is very keen to work with us on a long term basis.

Sponsorship Update

We take this opportunity to thank all our donors who supported us during the financial year 2015-16. Sponsorships for children is one of the best ways to support them. But such sponsorships need to make a meaningful impact in the lives of children, which must include their families and communities as well. Relief Foundation has learnt this importance of involving parents and communities from its experience of running schools in the past. So, at every stage of a child's development, we

involve parents and try to extend programmes for the immediate community where the children belong to. We do not compromise on the quality of education provided to a child in rural area. Montessori material, training for adults who directly work with children and above all running such a centre in a village require funds. With the increasing cost of material and also other consumables, our cost per child has also increased. A consistent and stable environment alone can provide a safe and quality learning space for children. Relief Foundation wants to create and continue to provide such a space for children in every project. We seek your continued support in the new academic year too. Please check the section on "How you can support us" for the new sponsorship amount.

People interested to donate can write to us @ relieffoundationindia@gmail.com



How you can support us?

- ❖ Sponsor a child - towards cost of educating and supporting the family of children in our centres in rural areas - Rs 20000/- per year (Applicable from April 2016)
- ❖ Sponsor education - towards cost of supporting a child's education, studying in a school, till the age of economic independence identified by Relief Foundation, after a due diligence screening process. Rs 6000/- per year per child including educational resources, home library, home visits and counseling sessions for families for responsible living and linking them to various Government schemes where applicable.
- ❖ Sponsor an awareness program - towards creating awareness programs in our centres for the community, we require material as well as human resource support. To conduct the following programs in our centres, per session the costs including all the expenses to cover about 30 families would be Rs 20,000. Resource persons and materials, besides flyers would be used for these programs
 - Alcoholism
 - Importance of education
 - Girl child protection
 - Hygiene and healthcare
 - Life without medicines
 - Self employment
 - Career options for youth
 - And so on...

Note: All donations made to Relief Foundation are exempted under Sec. 80G of the Income Tax Act of India

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